



AN ACCIDENTAL VISIT TO MAIN STREET

By HEYWOOD BROWN

FRANK O'MALLEY, once a New York reporter, wrote an article recently for The Saturday Evening Post which he called "Main Street, Manhattan." Mr. O'Malley was indulging in convenient symbolism and was using his title as a base on which to build an argument that Broadway is just as provincial in its psychology as any street in Gopher Prairie. All New York reporters grow cynical about Broadway when they become middle-aged and retired. That, however, is another story. Our case against Mr. O'Malley rests on the fact that he had no right to put Main Street in Manhattan, because it isn't there: it is in Brooklyn.

It is entirely possible that the average passerby would stare curiously at any visitor who asked him, "Which is the way to Main Street?" The New Yorker might even grin broadly, secure in the notion that another traveler from the Middle West had come to town, but Main Street exists and is recognized by the postal authorities at least. Some years ago, when F.P.A. ran The Gotham Gazette for The Evening Mail, he set down the number of the newspaper office as 301 (maybe that isn't the exact number) Main Street, jocosely trading upon the fact that The Mail was on Broadway. Presently, however, he found that mail addressed to that point drifted back to him only after a visit to some mystical thoroughfare in Brooklyn. We, too, had heard vaguely of the existence of such a street, but it was not within our experience until we stumbled on it, quite by chance.

Our first discovery in the voyage of adventure was the Fulton Street Ferry. Once upon a time this was one of the busiest of the boat lines to Brooklyn, but on the morning we wandered in only two other passengers were waiting in the old ferry house, a ferry house grizzled and decrepit, indeed; a ferry house so beyond hope that cobwebs have settled heavily upon the deserted newsstand to which passengers once crowded to find out what Greeley thought about Lincoln or to buy the latest issue of Godey's Ladies' Book. The line has long since ceased to expect passengers, or to take any particular pains to welcome them. From outside, by far the most imposing entrance was the one plainly labeled "Oysters and Crabs." The narrow door marked "Passengers" was distinctly subsidiary. Seemingly oysters and crabs, more loyal than men, still cling to the old Fulton Street Ferry line. However, we found none in the waiting room. The traveling public of three was not augmented in spite of a wait of half an hour or so. The old ticket seller was unable to give us any assurance of the exact time at which a boat was to be expected. The schedule was rather uncertain, he admitted. Seemingly, the boats are run every little while, more

for the sake of sentiment than anything else.

Still, when the boat came in it was not exactly the sort of ferry to which one could become attached easily, certainly not on short acquaintance. To us it presented so vague and mildewed a personality that we have not even remembered its name. Yet there are elements of danger and excitement in a deep sea voyage upon the Fulton Street Ferry. The helmsman needs a steady hand, for the piles designed to break the force of a miscalculation in landing hold their places but feebly in the river bed and give now this



So this is Main Street! Father Knickerbocker never knew he had one

way and that to the rush of river tides. Coming under the Brooklyn Bridge the man at the wheel steered gingerly and with caution. He managed to avoid all the rotten piles with which the landing is trapped and brought his craft to rest hole high, having nosed into his pier with so light a touch that the ferry house still stood with nothing more than the slightest of shudders, and that might well have been from the wind rather than the gentle impact of the ferryboat. Following the waterfront a few blocks we came to the evident site

of some other ferry landing now gone and replaced by the pier of a paper company. We looked up at this point to orient ourselves and there upon the lamp-post of the street which led up from the river into town we found the name "Main Street."

At first we could not see the street itself, for a passing freight had dropped a car on the tracks which cut across the end of the street. But whatever folk had been down to see the train had gone

back now, for it was noon, high noon, in Main Street and the Universal Restaurant, home of Main Street cosmopolites, was for the moment the centre of attention. We hope we know our Sinclair Lewis well enough to record that the gold "L" in the name of the restaurant upon the plate glass has disappeared. The proprietor, perhaps, had been unwise enough in a moment of generosity to give some patron or other an inch. The display in the window included a

rate, of pilsener. In the right hand window stands a card announcing "Business Men's Lunch" and in the left window another advertising "Meeting Rooms." Here, if anywhere in Main Street, is the home of the Thanatopsis Club. Business in Main Street must be bad, for only two merchants were eating the business men's lunch, which consisted this time of lamb stew and macaroni. Trade seemed slightly more brisk in the Universal than in the Old Homestead Lunch, only two doors away from the restaurant. Here was no food, but only

a slightly reddish geranium in the single window, but there was ample evidence outside of the fare within, for upon a folding blackboard was chalked the following menu: Split Pea Soup, 10 cents; Roast Beef, 30 cents; Hamburger Steak, 25 cents; Beef Stew, 25 cents; Ham Croquettes, 30 cents; Baked Beans, 15 cents; Tomato Salad, 30 cents; Pies and Coffee, 5 cents; Rice Pudding, 5 cents; Home Made Cake, 10 cents.

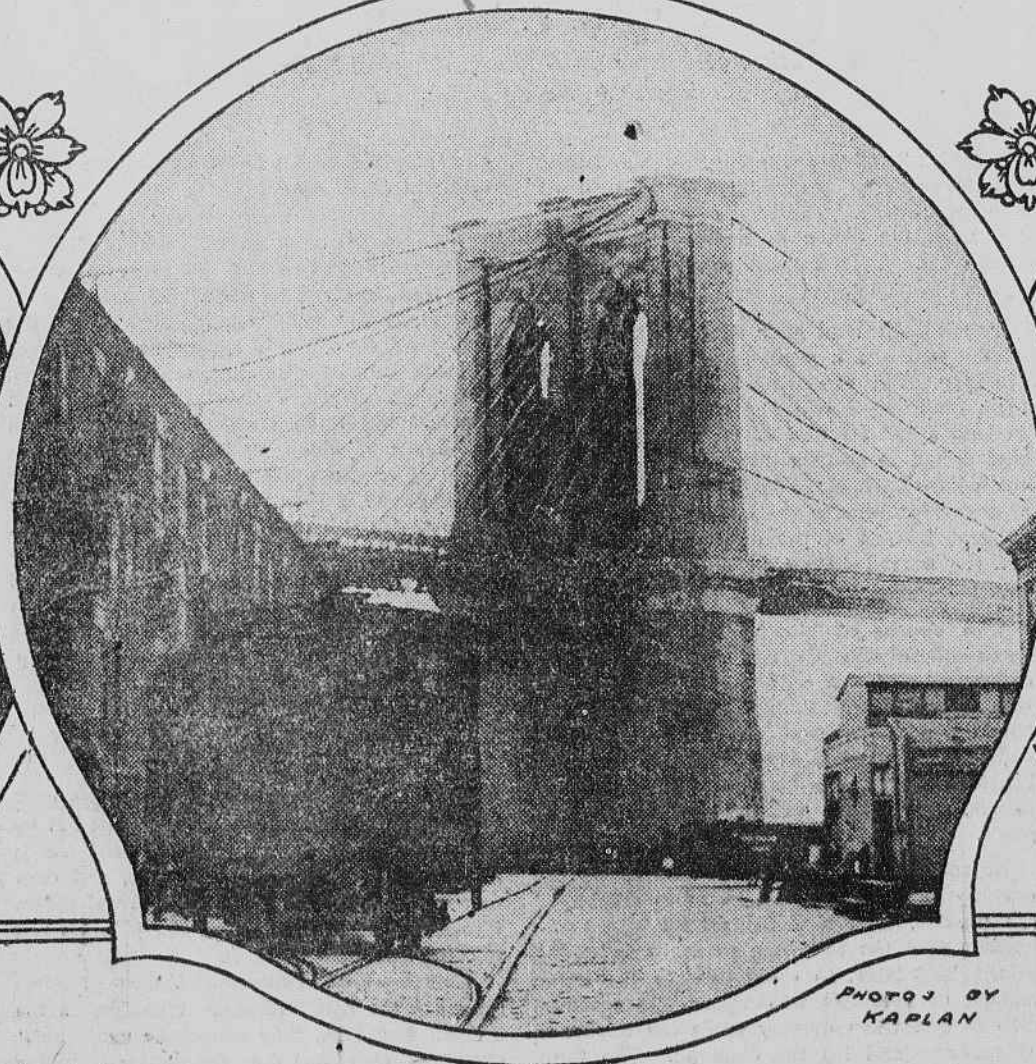
Between the Universal and the Old Homestead stands the Rose Rizzella Confectionery, mute testimony to the increasing foreign influence in the community. Like most of the other buildings in the block, Rose Rizzella's store stands in a three story frame building. The window features peanut brittle and red paper decorations. Across the street is her rival, The Main Confectionery, and here we must confess to have allowed the influence of Sinclair Lewis to abate a little. We can't remember for the life of us what The Main Confectionery had to sell. A neighboring building, however, is more plainly in our memory, for this is the eyesore of Main Street. The old frame building has shed most of its shingles and the windows are gone and replaced by boards. Some day Main Street is going to do something about this building. It might give the town a bad name.

The National League for Women's Service Neighborhood House showed that uplift has come to Main Street. Carrie's campaign has not been without effect. Skipping again across the street we come to the Prescription Pharmacy, which is run under the sub-title of Use Ex-Lax. In all there are four short blocks to Main Street, and the upper half, which approaches the bridge, is given over to residences. We came on wash day and one of the newer residents, an Italian, was hanging out clothes boldly on a rudimentary piazza at the front of the house. Here, too, is more work for the Main Street uplifters.

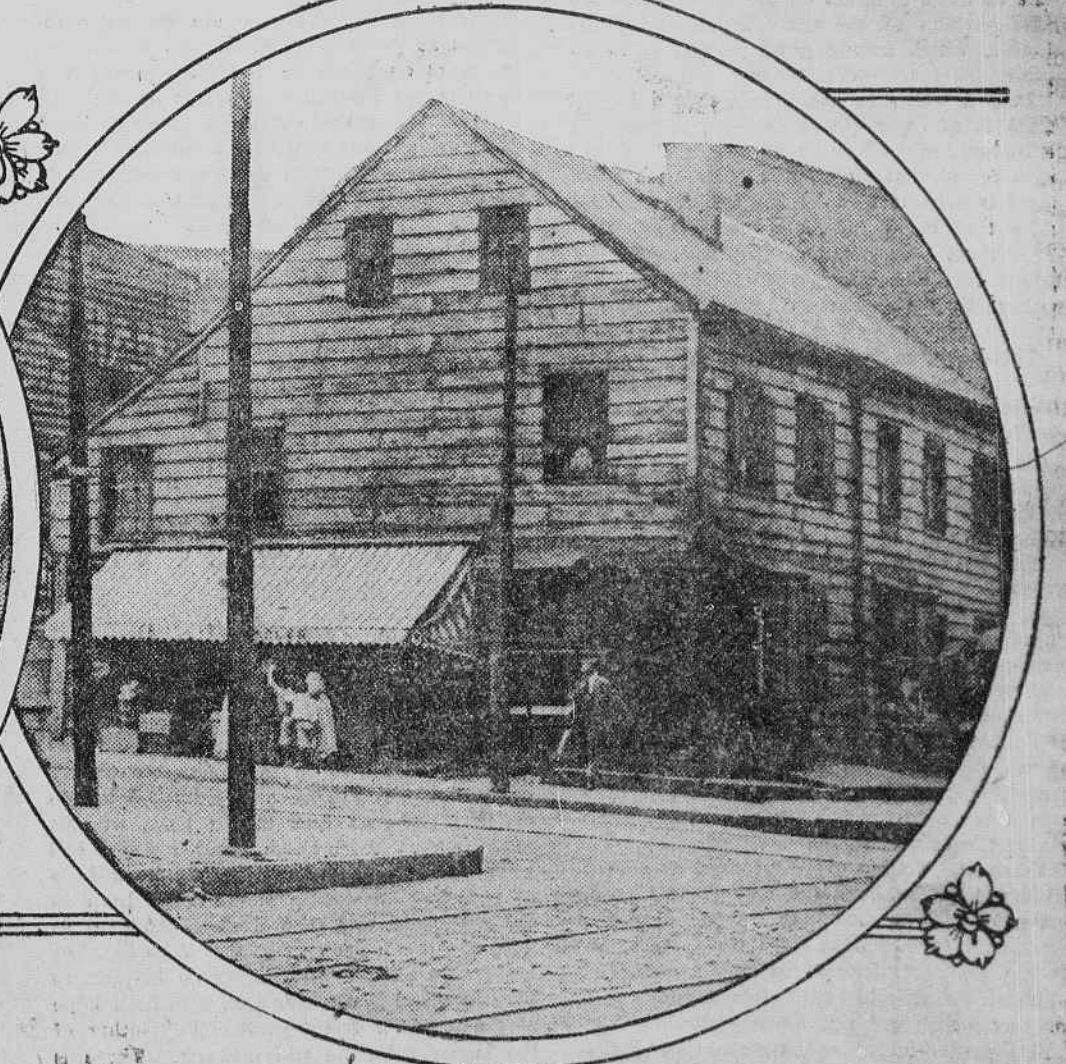
Just at the junction where Main Street gives up the fight and allows Fulton to snip out its life is a small stand advertising Coney Island frankfurters, but this is practically the only mark of the threatened metropolitan invasion of Main Street, which holds to its old manners and landmarks. As a matter of fact, it has a tradition. In the days when the ferry house was still open, Main Street was one of the most flourishing of Brooklyn thoroughfares. It came by its name honestly. Fulton was then only an upstart rival, but with a change in traffic lines Main Street has been outdistanced. It remains a street of little shops and small and dingy tenements. Coming home over the bridge it was possible to see the back yards of Main Street, but anybody who attempted to deal with their richness in anything like true Sinclair Lewis detail would need at least a volume.



The eyesore of Main Street which is giving the town a bad name



The noon freight drops a car at Main Street siding



Main Street crosses Front Street. All Main Streets do this